

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: February 13, 2019

Agenda Item: W W White FAS Acquisition (R2)

Division: Fisheries

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background

FWP manages only one FAS on the West Fork of the Bitterroot River, a 1.5-acre site (leased since 2001) known as W W White FAS, located 6 miles south of Darby, Montana. FWP has been contacted by the landowners who would like to sell the current leased acreage and up to an additional 115 contiguous acres which would provide fishing access on approximately 0.47 river-frontage miles as well as protect important wildlife habitat. The landowners have expressed a desire for the property to be in permanent public ownership. The entire west and southwest boundaries of the property (3/4 miles) are bordered by US Forest Service land. The landowners have been approached by at least one private corporation interested in purchasing the property. The existing leased FAS is a popular site to launch and takeout boats on the river. Primitive camping could be permitted as the property already has an ideal small campground framework established for family use. FWP would like to explore fundraising opportunities with partners and identify potential funding mechanisms from both fisheries and wildlife to purchase the property in fee title.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP is seeking endorsement by the Commission to pursue due diligence and possible acquisition of the property. Public involvement would occur through the Environmental Assessment process in both the acquisition process and subsequent site development activities.

Alternatives & Analysis

The Commission could choose not to endorse pursuing purchase of the currently leased W W White FAS and additional contiguous acreage being offered. Currently the landowners are open to discussing a possible sale to FWP as a first choice. If choosing not to pursue the property, the window of opportunity may close if the owner becomes disinterested in the concept or sells to another buyer. The existing leased FAS could be lost if the property were sold to another buyer. Alternatively, FWP acquiring the property would greatly enhance public access to this section of the river, protect wildlife habitat, and potentially offer camping opportunities for the public.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends that the Commission endorse further due diligence towards acquiring the leased W W White FAS and additional contiguous acreage as an FAS. The current leased property is on the West Fork of the Bitterroot River and currently receives a lot of use. FWP acquisition would ensure continued availability of the current site to the public and secure important fish and wildlife habitat. Endorsement would trigger further activities, including public involvement processes if the landowners and FWP can reach feasible agreement details.

Proposed Motion

I move that the Commission endorse FWP's request to pursue due diligence towards possible acquisition of the leased W W White FAS and additional contiguous acreage, with the goal of establishing an FWP-owned FAS.